

TELL ME A STORY: The goddess Rhiannon (A Welsh tale)

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Once upon a time the goddess of the moon, Rhiannon, ruled with her father over the land of fairies. Rhiannon lived in her father's crystal palace at the edge of a shimmering lake. She was so sweet that everyone fell in love with her, and when she was grown, her father promised her in marriage to a man Rhiannon did not love.

She could not love him, for she was already in love with a mortal, Prince Pwyll.

One spring afternoon, as Pwyll was in the forest with his friends, he happened to step upon a Tor, a magical spot covering the entrance to the fairy world below. In that moment Rhiannon appeared before him, and he fell instantly in love at the sight of this beautiful woman in glittering gold.

She was riding her handsome white horse, and she galloped past without even turning to look at Pwyll. From that moment he could think of nothing but her.

"I must marry that girl," Pwyll said.

"You're mad," his friends told him. "You cannot love one of the fairies; she has only bewitched you."

But Pwyll did not listen. Instead, he sent his servant to catch Rhiannon.

The servant set off, but soon returned to report the goddess had escaped.

"She was too fast," the servant said. "Her horse rode as if it were not even touching the earth."

The next day Pwyll returned to the same spot. Once again Rhiannon appeared and galloped away, but this time Pwyll gave chase.

Just before she sped out of sight, he called, "Please, wait!"

And she stopped.

Pwyll trotted close, and Rhiannon smiled at him and said, "You ought to have called out long ago and saved your horse."

Pwyll immediately understood she had chosen him.

"Come to my kingdom with me," he said, but she told him she would come in one year. And then she vanished.

A whole year had passed when, on a beautiful spring day, Rhiannon reappeared on the Tor. Pwyll waited for her, and she silently gestured for him to follow her into the forest. Pwyll signaled to his servants to follow along.

The men followed Pwyll and Rhiannon and watched in amazement as the trees before them parted. Once they had ridden past those trees, the path closed behind them, and the men trembled with fear.

They were afraid until they reached a clearing filled with songbirds. When the men heard those birds sing, all their worry and fear dissolved. They all traveled happily on until they reached the crystal palace with spires so high they seemed to touch heaven.

"Now we shall celebrate our wedding," Rhiannon told Pwyll. Hundreds of fairies appeared, along with a great feast, and for hours everyone sang and danced and ate and drank.

Alas, the man who had once been promised to Rhiannon suddenly began to cause a scene, wailing angry threats. Rhiannon tried to calm him, but when he would not settle down, she magically transformed him into a badger and swept the badger into a bag.

She tossed the badger into the lake, calling out, "Do not bother us again."

And the very next day, Rhiannon and Pwyll departed for Wales. When they emerged again from the forest, the path to the fairy world closed behind them. Rhiannon looked back and knew she would never return to her childhood home.

But Rhiannon loved Pwyll, and the people of Wales welcomed her. For two years all was joyous, but soon people began to question Rhiannon's fitness as a queen, for she had not yet had a child. Many turned against her and refused to call her their queen.

And then in the third year of their marriage, she gave birth to a strong, healthy son, and six servants helped to care for the boy. They watched over him day and night.

One night the servant on watch fell asleep. When she woke, she discovered the cradle was empty. Terrified, she decided she must blame the queen. After all, she was an outsider.

While Rhiannon slept, the servant smeared blood on her hands. Then she woke the others crying, "The queen has killed her son!"

Pwyll was so grief-stricken, and the people were so furious, he could do little but offer to spare Rhiannon's life. He announced that her punishment would be to spend seven years sitting by the castle gate, wearing a horse collar. To all who came to the palace, she would have to tell the story of her crime and offer to carry them upon her back into the castle.

Through harsh winters and hot summers, Rhiannon did all this without complaint, and as time passed, respect for her spread throughout the country.

In the fourth year three strangers appeared at the palace gate ? a nobleman, his wife and a young boy. Rhiannon greeted them, and to her surprise, the man lifted Rhiannon onto his horse. The boy handed her a piece of a gown.

Rhiannon's eyes filled with tears because she knew this was a cloth she herself had sewn for her baby boy.

And when the boy smiled at her, she saw her own husband's eyes in his eyes.

The nobleman explained that four years earlier, on a stormy night, the nobleman was called to a field to help a mare in labor. He heard an infant's cry and found the child lying in the field. He and his wife raised the boy as their own, but when he heard the tale of Rhiannon, he knew this must be her child.

People say the child was stolen by the bewitched badger who had been left to die in the lake. But now the child was safe, and Rhiannon was restored to a place of honor. She forgave everyone.

And ever since, Rhiannon has been known as the goddess of the healing power of love and forgiveness, the one who remains strong even in the hardest times.

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